

(September 2009)

In the years I taught as an adjunct professor at Rowan University, I read aloud to my students at the end of each class. I did so for two reasons. One, I believe in the power of words and stories (remember?). I have often told my students, whether they be eighth graders or college juniors, that by reading, we are destined to find genuine companions in the literary characters we meet. These characters can foster fellowship and peace of mind, and they can frequently offer us escape and answers. Too, they can help us understand, belong, or persevere; any one of these alone is a gift. The literary gift given to us by the writer becomes a gift from the reader, however when the effort is made to read aloud. Listeners can fully immerse themselves in the author's ability to wordsmith-- and they can sink into the language, the ideas, and the imagery. No small gift, wouldn't you agree?

Though most educators believe in the power of reading aloud, most teachers and parents conclude this practice all too early. Thus, I made it a point to read aloud to my college students- so they could again appreciate the pleasure of listening- regardless of their ages. It was always my hope that once they had their own classrooms, they would make it a point to read to their own students. My book of choice was always *Teacher Man* by Frank McCourt. McCourt, known principally for *Angela's Ashes* and *'Tis*, has an equally fine story in *Teacher Man*. He describes his early years as a teacher, struggling to reach his disengaged, unmotivated students. McCourt, by his own account, had no idea how to manage his students- much less how to reach them. His solution? He told stories. Ah! As you may recall from my last letter, I believe deeply in our stories' unquestionable value to connect us to one another. This tremendous lesson I learned in no small part, from Frank McCourt. Reading aloud to my college students created a time in which McCourt was able to reach us all.

I share this bit of my Rowan story with you because Frank McCourt died this summer. I think of his stories frequently, and in *Teacher Man*, he bestowed a gift on all who value education, the ability to learn on the fly, and, of course, a good tale. McCourt understood the power of the narrative to connect us- parent to child, friend to friend, colleague to colleague, teacher to student. As we begin a new school year, I look forward to creating with you, a new chapter in Ellison's fine history by adding to the canon of stories our school holds already. McCourt said in a 2005 interview that "When your teaching is going well, walking into the classroom is like walking into a garden." I have every confidence that our 2009-2010 school year will mirror McCourt's garden. We plant seeds, we tend, we nurture, we feed, and we add warmth. What we all will have sown by June, will be treasures of inestimable value. I encourage you to ask your children frequently of their most meaningful school day story. Cultivate what you hear- it will grow both roots and branches. And by all means, read aloud to your children, regardless of their ages.

Frank McCourt's garden is here- in every classroom at Ellison. We are fortunate, and if we remain diligent, we will be richer for our efforts. Wishing you time to listen to stories read aloud, time to tend your garden, and an extraordinary school year. . .

Caroline Chapman